

In His Own Words

by Robin A. Zimmerman

Ludwig van Beethoven pounds the piano and quickly moves his ear trumpet toward the keys searching for the perfect note. With a fling of his wrist, he brushes aside the scattered compositions, grabs his pen, and slashes one note and then another on his scarred music score. Rising, he stomps and paces — paying no heed to the unemptied chamber pot beneath the piano, to the chair strewn with clothing or to the plates bearing the remains of too many meals. Abruptly he stops, snatches a pen encrusted with ink, titles a new score, and wildly composes.

*[Ideas] come unsummoned...
I could seize them with my
hands, out in the open air;
in the woods; while walking;
in the silence of the nights...
tones that sound, and roar
and storm about me until I
have set them down in notes.*

My miserable hearing does not trouble me here...O, the sweet stillness of the woods!

With notebook in hand, Beethoven strolls beside a bubbling, winding brook. Birdsong fills the morning air, and tones whirl like the wind. Humming, his mind swarms with sweet soaring melodies, delicate harmonies — all spiritually uplifting. “Nature,” he whispers to the mountains, “is a glorious school for the heart.”

For Beethoven, music was personal. It was the duel between darkness and light, conflict and resolution. Some compositions show rage — his inability to hear intimate conversations, forest songs, or even his own symphonies. Others show anxiety and sorrow — his heavy soul, loveless life, and deep longing for family. Still others show joy.

My Muse often whispered to me...write down the harmonies in your soul...I felt some trepidation; but my Muse wills it, so I obeyed.

Mozart and Haydn, for the most part, composed comparatively lighthearted music, unlike Beethoven who takes his listeners on an emotional roller coaster. His music is abrupt, veering from chaos to serenity. It is jittery and messy, not flowing; dangerous, tense, and angry, not light and breezy. Chords are haywire, not in tune, and the listener emerges completely spent. At the moment when one can no longer tolerate the fiery physical demand, sheer relief arrives.

“Listeners...can relate to the longing, agitation,

and tumultuous character of much of his work,” renowned music expert Stewart Pollens says. “The harmonies and modulations that might have seemed unusual or even ‘wrong’ in his day are accepted into modern time.”

I know that [my music] will yet be appreciated.

Beethoven’s controversial music set a new standard for what a symphony could be. His passion and unpredictability keep him alive and influential even today. From a young age, he remained true to his voice, composing not just for aristocrats, but for all people. Beethoven firmly believed that he was composing for eternity. And he was right. Two hundred years later, his music still has a profound effect on everyone.

“We can all put ourselves in Beethoven’s shoes,” internationally acclaimed concert violinist Rachel Barton Pine says, “because no matter who we are and what our life has been, we’ve all experienced moments of trouble and moments of doubts. Beethoven doesn’t shy away from expressing that in his music.”

What is in my heart must come out.

Beethoven’s music transcends time and place. Children worldwide are moved by his melodies. A group of young Nigerian musicians working with Pine connected with Beethoven upon first playing his compositions. Although they had no prior exposure to classical music or its traditions, Beethoven’s music deeply spoke to them. The recognition of great art is universal.

“Beethoven is not just a composer,” world-renowned conductor Michael Tilson Thomas said. “He’s a brand. He’s an icon.” Beethoven appears in television and commercials, soundtracks and pop culture — including flashmobs (see page 15) — where his work comes to life.

Robin A. Zimmerman lives in the California Sierra Nevada foothills, where she writes about people passionately drawn to the arts.